

# A NAVY DENTIST'S REFLECTIONS ON 9/11

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***Editor's note. This testimonial was commissioned in 2011 for the Dental Corps Centennial Book***

9/11 was a day I will never forget. I distinctly remember just finishing up a patient treatment that morning when I heard over the clinic public address system that all providers report to the medical front desk immediately. I and all the other providers in the dental clinic went to the front desk area. We all inquired what was going on. No one knew exactly what had happened. Someone said it was some kind of a mass casualty event and it was not a drill. Personnel went back to the dental clinic to gather any equipment we could find, masks, gloves, oxygen tanks and go-bags.

Upon leaving the clinic to provide assistance, I was struck by the hordes of hundreds of people literally running for their lives. You literally could feel and smell the panic. It was a virtual human stampede. I will never forget the expressions of horror on the faces of people running past me trying to get out of the Pentagon as fast as they could. A group of us decided to take some supplies and go into the building toward what and where we did not know. You could start to smell smoke and assume that there was a fire somewhere as well. I remember thinking that there is something innately wrong about running into a burning building when everyone else was running out of it, but at the time it seemed like that was something we had to do. The smoke became overwhelming as we approached the center ring vicinity. At that point we could see casualties coming out.

We assisted bringing people out of the building. The smoke got worse and trying to make it further into the building seemed futile. There were too many injured coming out. We finally pulled back and went to our muster point in back of the Pentagon Athletic Center and established a triage site. That site is now in the middle of what is now the middle of I-395N as a result of the re-routing of that road in response to changing the security at the Pentagon.



CAPT Santulli rendering assistance to individual suffering smoke inhalation

*Image courtesy of Captain Santulli*

We saw many casualties. I don't exactly know how many but we were busy for what seems like a couple of hours. It was estimated later on that the dental clinic personnel saw at least half of all the casualties that escaped to the north side of the building. Most of those trapped on the south side of the building did not make it out. They were mostly incinerated. Patients suffered from shock, cuts, broken limbs, hysteria and many had smoke inhalation. I remember that everything seemed like it was happening in slow motion. We administered IVs, and provided as much care as we could for the little equipment and supplies that we had. Although it had been about fifteen years since I had C-4 training at Camp Bullis, in San Antonio, Texas, I was amazed that a lot of what I had learned came back immediately. I never thought I would have to use that training especially on a stateside tour.

Some of our clinic personnel were waiving down private vehicles on the road adjacent to the Pentagon and I-395 to act as make shift ambulances to transport casualties to the nearest hospital facility. I remember asking one individual who had come out of the building what had happened. He responded, that there was a huge explosion and that he thought a plane might have struck the Pentagon. We had also been informed that planes may have struck the Twin Towers in New York. Hearing that gave me a great deal of concern. My brother takes the train into the World Trade Center in the morning and my wife was working in the U.S. Capitol on that particular day. I knew that this was no accident and that there could be more to come and that there was a distinct possibility we might not make it through this day alive.

Once the casualties were taken care of and evacuated from the triage site, our clinic personnel were directed to muster on South parking side of the Pentagon, closer to where the plane had hit the building. It was mass chaos. No one was in charge, yet all the first responders acted in an orderly manner. We made

our way around the perimeter of the Pentagon and waited for further instructions at a point adjacent to the field by South parking and near I-395 South. We got close enough to the site where I could see remnant parts of what was the plane that crashed into the Pentagon with parts strewn across the field. By that time emergency response units from the local fire department had arrived, but there was not a whole lot they could do. They doused the building with water but the walls looked very unstable and ready to collapse. At one point dental personnel were going to be tasked with going into the building to help with recovery efforts. We were told the smell of the smoke and potential human remains could be overwhelming.

I remember asking some of our female clinic members who had taken their bags and pocketbooks with them if they had any kind of perfume that we could use to douse cotton gauze to put inside our masks. We started passing out the gauze to our people to put in their masks. No one flinched, we were willing to go. The authorities from the fire department finally decided the building was too unstable to proceed. Also since it was designated a crime scene, they decided to have the FBI go in once it was more secure. So thankfully that tasking did not go forward. At that point there was a lot of waiting and wondering what would come next. We were part of a group of hundreds of people assembled on the grounds of the Pentagon waiting for further instructions. It seemed no one wanted to leave the site, but there wasn't much we could do. At one point we heard a jet overhead which caused a panic among all who were in the field. People were yelling to take cover. The thought was it was another plane coming at the Pentagon to finish off first responders and survivors of the first attack. Everyone ran back toward the guard rails and the gully by the section of I- 395 to take cover. Someone yelled, hey it's OK it's one of ours. The plane was an Air Force F-16 and he flew low and fast over the building and dipped his wings as if he was trying to tell everyone on the ground we have you covered, there won't be another suicide plane coming in.

We were now into the late afternoon, the on- scene commanders had instructed our group from dental and others to go back around the building and get to the center court yard area inside the ring. It was an eerie feeling, a beautiful sunny day that had been punctuated by carnage and destruction. You could see and smell smoke but from that vantage point no fire was visible. A number of us volunteered to organize into small groups to go into the affected wedge for rescue/recovery efforts, thinking that the area would be more stable than the outer wall on the south side; we had no equipment and no breathing devices. Our people were willing to go but the fire marshals would not let us in. We felt totally helpless. There was not much we could do. Clinic personnel frantically tried to use a limited number of cell phones that people had to try and call their homes to let family know they were OK. After multiple attempts due to the disruption of cell tower reception, I was finally able to leave a short message on our home answering machine to let my wife know I was fine. She was not home yet and I was extremely worried what her status was at the Capitol. As the day wore into the night dental and medical personnel had one last assignment. We were tasked with retrieving

and laying out black vinyl body bags in the court yard in preparation for final recovery efforts. It was a sad and somber ending to a long day. We were all physically and mentally exhausted. We didn't want to leave but were ordered to go home.

Before we left that night, we were told to report to work the next day because the dental clinic was going to be open, no matter what. I remember driving back at dawn of 12 September and could see plumes of smoke still rising from the Pentagon. Amidst all this smoke and the existing water damage in the building, the PTDC was up and running and seeing patients. For our clinic personnel it was a real moral boost to get back to some kind of routine in defiance of what had happened just twenty four hours ago. We will never forget 9/11.